1 Developing your identity, agency and voice [Ch]
Hazel Richards

Chapters objectives [F] ________________________________________
This chapter considers the place of identity, agency, and voice in your practice. The chapter:

• uses theory to build your understanding of these concepts;

• poses critical questions to enable you to reflect on your own identity, agency, and voice;

• considers emerging research and;

• proposes how you can empower your identity, agency and voice.

Time to consider ______________________________________________

• Who are you as a practitioner and what do you bring?
• What do you already know about identity, agency and voice?

Introduction [A]
Children and family support workers are often driven by altruism and moral capital since they are empowered to actions that will create change and betterment. Politics, values, and ethics merge to create practitioners who
believe in the worth of such work. This chapter investigates theory surrounding the concepts of identity, agency and voice which are central to this, since such knowledge can help you to shape your responses, empower your practice and maintain your sense of social agency.

Theory and Literature [A]

Identity [B]

Identity, as a person’s source of meaning and motive, is central in informing how individual practitioners’ carry out their job role and responsibilities. Identity has been defined in different ways - as a stable, unchanging essence (Cooley, 1902) and also as an evolving state (Mead, 1934; Giddens, 1991). Theorists have grappled to describe what contributes to identity. Korsgaard (2009) suggests values underpin identity so orienting life around personally meaningful projects is important. Mollenhauer (2014) uses the German word *bildung* (which describes the process of self-cultivation and maturation) to suggest that identity emerges from the harmonisation of the mind and heart. This can be problematical since there may be a mismatch between our desires and the actualisation of these. For that reason, Ball (1972) separates a core presentation of self that is fundamental to how a person thinks from another, malleable, identity that adapts according to the context or situation. Erikson (1959) also recognised this difference, suggesting that we all have a real (forever revised and what we are able to attain within social reality) and ideal identity (‘a set of to-be-strived-for but forever-not-quite-attainable ideal goals for the self’, p 140).

Jenkins (2004) therefore suggests humans can be best understood in terms of their personal, professional and collective selves, and that these interact and inform the philosophies and belief systems that drive our actions. Indeed, your personal identity is central to your performance of professional roles since who you are and what you bring influences the way you construe and carry out your work. Professional identity is concerned with role identity, which is connected with subject and job knowledge, as well as with professional ideals, goals and values. External conditions (professional knowledge, context of setting and
wider educational contexts) contribute to the formation of professional identity through “socialisation and absorbing values” (Phillips and Dalgarno, 2017, p 2). An interrelationship between personal and professional identities therefore exists, with one informing the other. Significantly, strong professional identity constructions, which influence high levels of professional practice, are created when mismatches between who practitioners are as people, and what they do in practice, are worked through (Callero, 1985).

‘Biographicity’ is a term denoting individual responses to social conditions (Illeris, 2014, p 152). Collective identity is therefore also important since viewpoints created by individual experience are influenced by societal conditions and by environments. This means the beliefs and attitudes you hold, can align with, or be challenged and modified by factors in the contexts and settings you work in. Furthermore, commitment (to a team or a setting) is affected by an individual’s sense of being included and belonging, with identity having a key influence on the sustained commitment and motivation of educational professionals (Jo, 2014; Vähäsantanan, 2015). In contrast, feeling peripheral affects self-esteem, motivation, and collaboration, which can impact on the agency of practitioners (Isaksson and Lindqvist, 2015).

**Time to Consider**

- How is your professional identity developing? How would you like it to develop further?
- Identify a time when your values conflicted with a task undertaken as part of your role? What helped you address/overcome this?
- When have you experienced the strongest sense of belonging at work and what contributed to this?

**Agency**

Agency refers to the thoughts and actions taken by persons that express their individual power (Bourdieu, 2002). Taylor (1985) describes a human agent as one who has some understanding of self. Professional agency represents the idea that professionals have the power to take stances, make decisions, and
influence matters. However, agency is not ‘solely lodged in the body of an individual agent’ (van de Putte et al, 2017, p 885), and constraints, such as stress and workload can restrict it. In practice, we are part of an ‘intra-active entanglement of multiple agencies’ (Van de Putte et al, 2017, p 885), with agency being linked to status in multi-disciplinary working (Meyer and Lees, 2013). However, defining agency is difficult. Some suggest professional agency is ‘practiced’ by being able to influence one’s work and professional identity (Taylor, 1985). Others define agency as a ‘capability’ (Pyhältö et al, 2015). An alternative definition is offered by Biesta et al (2016, p 626), who describe it as an ‘actor-situation transaction’ that results from ‘the interplay of individual efforts, available resources, and contextual and structural factors as they come together in particular …unique situations’ (Biesta and Tedder, 2007, p 137). Therefore, agency is not something people either possess or don’t possess, but is something they can develop in transaction with their situation.

Agential concepts include self-efficacy, locus-of-control, autonomy and self-reliance. Self-efficacy is the belief individuals hold about their ability to achieve desired outcomes (Huberman, 1989), which determines how opportunities are perceived, how choices are made, and the effort and persistence made. Locus-of-control relates to a person’s perception of internal control over external conditions (Rotter, 1966). When individuals perceive outcomes to be dependent on or influenced by their own skill or efforts, they have a greater sense of power and influence. Conversely, when individuals perceive their own skills and efforts have little impact on outcomes, their sense of powerlessness and ineffectiveness increases. For this reason, individuals ‘will act differently in different contexts and at different times depending on how they perceive [their] locus-of-control’ (Pantic, 2015, p768). Different arrangements and levels of authority can have therefore influence our sense of control and effectiveness as practitioners. Autonomy is concerned with independent practice, where professionals self-govern their work, and are accountable for the informed but independent decisions they make. Self-reliance is linked to this, as it denotes reliance on one’s own capabilities, judgement or resources, with opportunities to exercise these being shown to develop identity and agency (see Chapter10).
Resilience and confidence are concepts which also interact with agency. One definition of resilience is the ability to cope with and recover from adversity and change (Gu, 2016). This is an important resource for managing moral stress such as that created by role-identity conflict (Callero, 1985), with a balance between resignation and resistance being important. Confidence, which is a feeling of assurance or certainty, especially in oneself and one’s capabilities, but also in other people or things, makes an important contribution, and strong professional agency has been found to:

• be central to identity development;

• foster work-related learning, commitment, and well-being;

• be an important factor in change and development; and

• contribute to resilience and retention.

Time to Consider [F]-----------------------------------------------
• Think of a time you have felt empowered to action – what happened as a result?
• Think of a time you have felt -disempowered – what factors made you feel that way?
• In contrast, what factors increase your agency?

Voice [B]

Voice is significant to agency and change (Archer 2000; Emirbayer and Mische, 1998). As a verb, voice means expressing something in words, for example ‘she voiced her views’. As a noun it refers to a particular opinion or attitude, for example ‘a dissenting voice’ that needs to be listened to or granted a hearing. Listening and responding to the voices of children and families is central to legislation, policy, and practice (UNCRC (Unicef); Children and Families Act 2014; SEND Code of Practice 2015 (DfE and DoH, 2015); Serious Case Reviews, NSPCC). Lundy (2007) proposed that four key elements are required
for effective child voice: space (the opportunity to express a view); voice (individuals must be facilitated to express their views); audience (the view must be listened to); and influence (the view must be acted on, as appropriate).

These elements are also essential for practitioner voice, which sometimes ‘may be frail, especially among those with little power’ (Holland et al, 1998, p 5). The creation of ‘spaces’ where practitioners can actively participate and contribute to policy and practice is essential, as are safe places through which concerns can be voiced (through robust whistleblowing procedures). Sisson (2016) identifies risks associated with asserting one’s voice against dominant discourses, which can include social isolation from colleagues, increased surveillance and even loss of job. Certainly, audience and influence vary, with professionals who hold ‘higher’ professional knowledge and status (for example, paediatricians or educational psychologists) being respected and responded to more than practitioners who see the child, family, and their environment, daily.

Critical question [F]---------------------------------------------

Pre-pandemic practitioner voices may have focused on improving resources to support existing organisation and systems rather than on significant changes (Warnes, Done and Knowler, 2021) whereas the focus of pandemic voices were health and safety, crisis management and advocacy (Clarke and Done, 2021). What do you think ‘post’ pandemic voices should focus on?

Spotlight on New Debates [F]

So far, the contribution of identity, agency and voice to practice have been explored. This section considers how these are enabled or constricted in practice. Bio-ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1982) proposes macrosystem or institutional factors, such as socio-political culture and legislation, and exosystem or organisational factors, such as policy, ethos and funding, interact with a persons’ microsystem or individual circumstances
through the mesosystem. There can be a dynamic, bi-directional influence between these systems (Hayes et al., 2017). Figure 1.1 therefore synthesises Bronfenbrenner’s bio-ecological systems with identity and agency to illustrate the effect influences in your ecological systems can have on your real and ideal identities, and on your agency:

**Figure 1.1 - Diagram of real and ideal identity and agency, linked to Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory (Richards, 2019)**

In Figure 1.1, Bronfenbrenner’s systems are represented within the halves of the sand-timer to demonstrate that movement and influence occurs between them. Macrosystem (institutional level) and exosystem influences (organisational level) are contained in one half of the sand timer since influences at these levels affect how practitioners carry out their responsibilities. These have both commonalities (legislation and policy) and variances depending on the values, purpose and power of leaders and setting ethos. The other half of the sand timer represents the microsystem of practitioners working within these systems. Detail about identity has been added to the micro-system,
as well as agency as self-formation (Holland et al, 1998). The chronosystem is implied, not specifically labelled in the model, since it is a sand-timer.

The two halves of the sand timer are connected via the mesosystem. The mesosystem in Figure 1.1 includes continued professional development (CPD) opportunities, the capacity to influence change and affect progress, and effectual agency (Korsgaard, 2009). The left hand sand timer has a narrowed channel between the macro and exo systems and the microsystem, which represents the constrictions that often exist in reality. That is, where mismatches and/or constrictions exist between practice/work and ethos/approach, the reality can be practitioners whose agency is dampened. This contrasts with the right hand sand timer which has a wider, more open channel between the micro system and the macro and exo systems, thus representing ideal practice. That is, where a good match between practice/work and ethos/approach exists, the individual is more able to realise their ideal identity, agency and voice to effect change at institutional (macro) and organisational (exo) levels.

**Time to Consider [F]-----------------------------**

- Think about an occasion when you needed to speak out or act in practice, and were you able to do so?
- What enabled you (or constricted you) to do so?
- What areas of the institutional (macro) and organisational (exo) factors present in your setting are you able to influence?
- What areas do you feel less able to influence and why?

**Developing your identity, agency and voice [A]**

Factors that enable or constrict real and ideal identity, agency and voice have been considered. This section considers practitioner attributes and features associated with effective practice (Figure 1.2), then suggests how individual practitioners can empower their agency (Figure 1.3).

Figure 1.2, which depicts attributes of helpful, effective practitioners, emerged from research undertaken with 15 SENCoS working in the early years or primary
phase of education (Richards, 2019). Participants were asked to compare and contrast professionals whose practice they perceived to be helpful or unhelpful, before identifying how close these professionals were to their idea of effective practice. The professionals identified by participants included a range of roles across education, health and care. For example, educational psychologists, EHCP caseworkers, speech and language therapists, paediatricians, social workers and teachers.

**Figure 1.2 – Attributes of helpful, effective practitioners (Richards, 2019)**

The attributes that emerged from the data (Figure 1.2) are therefore applicable to practitioners supporting children and families across a range of roles.

**TIME TO CONSIDER**

- Think about which attributes you already hold?
- Which attributes would you like to add/focus upon as you develop your professional skills?

The case study below will support you to think about why the attributes of helpful, effective practitioners are important:
Hamida, 44, Learning support practitioner.

“I had always had a thirst for education and as a young child had dreams of walking with giants someday…However, I soon realised the views I had on education differed greatly from those of my parents’ views and community. It was simple – education was for males.

I struggled but accepted this as my only option so I found myself married by my late teens in the unpaid, unappreciated and repetitive role of a housewife. By 28 I had five children, controlling in-laws and a partner who was diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia. Stating it mildly, life was extremely tough and challenging and writing this brought back distressing memories … life was slowly destroying me from the inside but my children needed me so I had to stay strong. However, my dreams and aspirations, coupled with hope, gave me the will to carry on.

Plucking up the courage to ask my children’s Head teacher for a voluntary position was a brave move as it went against the wishes of specific individuals in my life, but I ignored these protests and persevered as I needed something for myself. Beautiful souls nurtured me and before long I had enrolled in college. I completed my maths qualification in addition to my Levels 2 and 3 Supporting Teaching and Learning NVQ. Things progressed further. I juggled work, family and study and completed my Foundation Degree, gaining recognition from college and university (I am so proud of my Outstanding Academic Achievement Award and trophy!). Then, in 2020, I completed my BA and achieved a first-class degree with honours from the University of Worcester.

Although, I do not yet have an official role, I believe education has considerably altered my status. Not only do females from my community approach me for advice but I have regular supportive conversations with females from an array of backgrounds and races. They know I am always happy to help on a personal and professional level and the respect and admiration I receive from these souls is indescribably unique. I have inspired many females to undertake learning
and provided reassurance and support and this is an area where I feel that I have been an agent of change. As a result, many have started volunteering, some have secured small jobs and a great number have qualified as teaching assistants.

The attitudes of my community are slowly changing too. Girls are being supported, are encouraged to complete education and are given choices. I feel mind-sets are altering slowly from fixed to growth and I feel satisfied that I have played a part in this. I will always be grateful to C.N for allowing me to volunteer in her setting (THANK YOU!) and I consider myself a prime example of the idea that through guidance and effort intellectual abilities can increase (Dweck, 1999).”

Time to Consider [F]—

- Reflect on Hamida’s account. What impression has it made on you?
- Identify attributes that Hamida demonstrates.
- In what areas of your life might you be able to be an agent of change and what attributes will you need?

Contexts both constrain and enable practice (see Figure 1.1), but are not, of themselves, ‘the point of origin of agentic possibilities’ (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998, p 974). Instead, agentic possibilities reside at the level of self. Figure 1.3 therefore suggests how individual practitioners can empower their agency and so influence outcomes for the children and families they work with:
Figure 1.3 – Strong agentic influence on evidence and outcomes (where relationships and knowledge and skills are good)

Figure’s 1.3 shows identity (collective, professional and personal) as the base on which agency rests. This is because it is through individuals that organisations act, meaning that the collective, professional and personal identity of practitioners underlie, and contribute to, systemic change. This means that whilst the institutional resources available (far left column), and organisational ethos (inner left column) are important, in fact the quality of evidence and outcomes (depicted in the two columns to the right of agency) can be raised by agents who have established good working relationships and who hold good knowledge and skills. This is because practitioner power is most active when agents work with other agents. Interpersonal interactions and relationships are key for collaboration and for acting with other agents. Indeed, the presence and strength of the relationships (see the cog in the centre of the diagram) and networks practitioners hold with key groups of people, including
professionals and caseworkers, setting staff, families, children and young people, and with their own peers and support network are central to person-centred, multi-professional care. Relationships are therefore a core area that practitioners and their settings should foreground.

Networks and connections also provide sources of support and information, since collaborative practice provides opportunities to engage with others, to include engaging with their knowledge and skills, and to critically consider different options. Figure 1.3 therefore also suggests that knowledge, (of process, of developmental norms, of individual children and their circumstances) and skills (including interpersonal communication and liaison) is a key factor in to strong agency. Furthermore, collaboration and engaging with others knowledge and skills will help develop your understanding of your specific child and family support role and will clarify how and what you can contribute (Anning et al, 2010). You should therefore recognise the contribution knowledge and skills make to informed practice and improved outcomes, which may mean embracing opportunities for online learning, forum and team meeting platforms, as progressed in the Covid-19 era.

Time to consider

- Think honestly and critically about your current knowledge and skill set. Which aspects are strong? Which areas are less strong?
- Who or what might be able to help you develop knowledge and skills in these areas?

CASE STUDY [F]

Monique, Student Welfare Officer, Comprehensive Secondary School.

“I have been working in education for around 5 years, but am now at a point where I want to take my career in a specific direction. I have started studying and completed the first year of my degree. I myself, am ‘neurodiverse’ and have a passion for inclusion. The knowledge I have gained in my study so far has further fuelled this passion and given me a definite idea of where I want to take my personal development and career. However, I have become
increasingly frustrated with the culture in education and how ‘dismissive’ it can be towards those who ‘don’t fit the system’.

I find resistance to making reasonable adjustments the more frustrating element of this culture. Whilst I get it can be difficult without endless pots of money and resources, one thing we can control is our attitude. Becoming fed up of dealing with inflexibility, I felt the need to challenge senior staff. Armed with more knowledge following subject reading, I became familiar with The Equality Act 2010 and other useful literature to support my passions which added weight to my points. I have stopped accepting the phrase ‘It sets a precedent’ - I challenge it with ‘whatever happened to individuality and teaching future generations about embracing difference?’.

However, I knew I needed support because I felt like I was fighting a losing battle, so I decided to approach somebody who I felt would listen, and I am certainly glad I did. This person was in a senior position and offered me much needed reassurance and told me the reason I felt like this was because I care. All I need to do is remain objective, use my knowledge gained throughout study and this will enable me to strive for the best for the young people, their families, my institution and also the wider education sector, reducing reactive practice and promoting proactive approaches and inclusive culture all round.”

Time to Consider [F]------  ---------------------------------------------
- How is Monique using her knowledge to empower her agency?
- What lessons can you take from this for your own practice?
- Identify a professional relationship that supports and enhances your practice. What features make this so helpful?

Chapter conclusion/summary [A]  ---------------------------------------------

Our identities are multi-faceted (personal, professional and collective) and inform our actions. Although our power to act and speak out can vary, where constraints exist, for example in resources and setting ethos, practitioners can still enhance their potential to exercise agency and voice. Change and betterment for the children and families with whom we work can be empowered
when practitioners build their held knowledge, skills and relationships, since as Kelly (1955, p 15) wrote:

‘there are always some alternative constructions available to choose among in dealing with the world. No one needs to paint himself (sic) into a corner; no one needs to be completely hemmed in by circumstances; no one needs to be the victim of this biography’.

Our hope is you prove the power of this in your own practice.

**Annotated further reading [A]**

Hayes, N, O’Toole, L and Halpenny, A M (2017) *Introducing Bronfenbrenner: a guide for practitioners and students in early years education*. Abingdon: Routledge. This book explores the bi-directional relationship between children and their environments. Although aimed at early years, the core theory is relevant to all other age groups.


**References [A]**


